

The World Grapples with Ongoing Conflicts

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Abstract

As global tensions rise, countries need to draw appropriate lessons from the two ongoing conflicts. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza has some lessons applicable to the Indian context, and the article tries to draw some of these major takeaways for India, including the need to develop hard power as deterrence based on military capabilities to include weapon systems, backed by the resolve to use their military. The other major takeaway is that India needs to wean away from import dependency. While the pursuit to infuse technology in the war-fighting system indeed remains an enduring one, self-sufficiency in critical technologies and investment in research and development are inescapable strategic imperatives. Another dimension of the war is strategic communication, and there are various communication strategies for social media, print media, and traditional electronic media that are managed at the national level. India needs to develop them.

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Introduction

Following on the heels of the protracted Ukrainian War, the horrific attack by Hamas on 07 Oct 2023, and the subsequent Israeli retaliation has now changed the existing security architecture across the globe. Volatility, uncertainty and ambiguity now seems to be the norm, and this only appears to be multiplying with the looming threat of tensions in the South China Sea, with Taiwan casting its shadow on future landscape. In the Indian context, four years after the night of savagery in Galwan, relations with China remain strained, and troops remain deployed in a tense standoff, as the main issue regarding Chinese intrusions into territory under Indian control is yet to be resolved but also because the fallout of mutual suspicion is creating new cycles of tension.

After the dramatic swings in territorial control during 2022, when the Ukrainian military managed to recapture parts of the Kharkiv region and the city of Kherson, the war settled into a positional and attritional grind in 2023, with both the tempo of operations and the intensity reducing.

The Gaza war is also showing no signs of concluding, despite repeated calls for a ceasefire. The worldwide focus is now on the humanitarian crisis that Israeli actions have unleashed. Despite international pressure, the situation in Rafah is dire, with nearly a million Palestinians displaced and living in tent camps with limited access to basic necessities like food, water, and sanitation. The humanitarian crisis has been exacerbated by a significant decline in the delivery of essential supplies, including food, fuel, and other necessities, to the United Nations and other aid organisations. The Israeli military's offensive in Rafah has resulted in numerous fatalities and injuries, and the situation is heart-wrenching for the Palestinians living there.

However, these wars have brought out issues regarding great power conflict, and the capacity to wage protracted wars while pursuing a strategy focused on attrition. It was believed that an interconnected global world would not permit protracted conflicts, but an analysis of conflicts post-World War II including these two seems to disprove that theory.

In today's world of war-fighting, those physically fighting are probably the smallest players. Those standing on the sidelines are the bigger players, but those nowhere near the war zone, who are both the perpetrators and the beneficiaries, are the biggest players.¹ As global tensions rise increasingly, countries need to draw appropriate lessons from these conflicts. India has attempted to draw some lessons as applicable in its context but at no stage can this list be taken to be all encompassing.

The wars in Ukraine and Israel are different in multiple ways but yet share commonalities. The world is increasingly being confronted with both symmetrical and asymmetrical concerns that can escalate into serious challenges.

Lessons for India: Fighting a War of Attrition

The world is witnessing two 'Attrition Wars' fought with a 'Force-Centric' approach, unlike wars of manoeuvre which are 'Terrain-Focused'. They are rooted in massive industrial capacity to enable the replacement of losses, geographical depth to absorb a series of defeats, and technological conditions that prevent rapid ground movement. In these wars, military operations are shaped by a state's ability to replace losses and generate new forces, not tactical and operational manoeuvres.²

As conflict drags on, the war is won by economies, not armies. Economies that enable mass mobilisation and sustainability, backed by a strong military industrial complex will prevail.³ This is because forces expand rapidly during such conflicts, requiring massive quantities of war-fighting hardware to include armoured vehicles and artillery, drones, electronic products, and other combat equipment. And two more prerequisites, a well-trained manpower and ammunition for all the assorted weaponry.

High-end weapons have exceptional performance but are difficult to manufacture and sustain, and they also require highly trained professional troops. Military operations in an attritional conflict are also distinct from those in a war of manoeuvre. Instead of a decisive battle achieved through rapid manoeuvre, attritional war focuses on destroying enemy forces and their ability to regenerate combat power, while preserving one's own.⁴

The Myth of Short and Localised Wars

The Ukraine War has upended many of the theories of war, including the one that states modern wars will be short, swift, and localised.⁵ Why is this war dragging on? The fact is that the war has not reached its logical conclusion yet. Similarly, it is stated repeatedly that wars will be localised. Again, this too is a myth. Both Ukraine and Gaza have the capacity of sucking-in the whole region into the conflict if not more. Iran is already partially 'In'.

Many wars, of course, do last longer. There are many reasons why compromises fail to take place. These could range from public opinion against a compromise, to leaders thinking that a compromise is defeat, which could threaten their own position. Sometimes there could be a lack of understanding of one's own strength and that of the enemy, leading to underestimating the damaging consequences of the conflict. All these factors have kept the war going.

Of course, the above reasons are rooted in a situation where there is not a clash of ideologies such as communism versus capitalism and autocracies versus liberal democracies or on religious grounds. Peace is impossible if ideological barriers prevent negotiations. Such values and ideas will continue to play a leading role in the wars waged in the future.⁶

India fought a war in 1971, being a classic case of 'Manoeuvre' and a short and swift campaign achieving its desired objectives. On the obverse, there's a continued deployment and standoff, both on the Line of Control and the Line of Actual Control.⁷

Wars are not only fought with external enemies. They can also be fought with internal enemies. Kashmir is an example. Sri Lanka is another example. A small country, both economically and militarily weak, showed the world its moral strength. While the world called it genocide, every human rights organisation thundered with alarm bells, but the Sri Lankan Army stopped only after the last man standing had been taken care of. Such internal conflicts too, sometimes defeat timelines.

India cannot be bound by stereotypes. The era of long wars is back. Therefore, India must recognise the multiple implications and relook at all aspects, which vary from recruitment, and mobilisation, to force sustenance and developing war-fighting doctrines.

Need To Develop and Sustain Hard Power

At its core, war is about power, who has it, who does not, and who can effectively use it. General Manoj Pande, the Chief of the Army Staff, has clearly stated, “The current Russia-Ukraine conflict provides some very valuable pointers. The relevance of hard power stands reaffirmed with land continuing to be the decisive domain of warfare and the notion of victory still being land-centric”. Countries need to develop hard power as deterrence based on their military capabilities to include weapon systems, backed by the resolve to use their military.⁸

Long-range precision strikes have proved that distances do not guarantee safety, and air is no longer dominated just by manned aircraft. There is so much more. Technology has emerged as a new strategic arena of geopolitical competition. However, come what may, the fact remains that an army needs boots and tracks on the ground.⁹

The very appearance of tanks over the horizon has a psychological impact on the enemy. Their employment is a fine art honed by meticulous planning and training. To seize and hold ground, you need armour and infantry. The war in Ukraine has not revealed anything fundamentally new about the tank. It has confirmed old lessons and reflected the challenges of armoured warfare. When there is peace the issue of armour getting redundant comes up time and again, but the moment there is war, countries want armour, as witnessed in Ukraine. The same is the case in Ladakh, where armour has been moved up, especially post-Galwan.¹⁰

Since the end of the Cold War and the advent of US-Russia arms control, the threat of nuclear weapons has become less salient. However, there has been certain signalling of nuclear weapons by Russia. US President Joe Biden also declared the risk of a nuclear armageddon to be at its highest level, bringing the nuclear issue firmly back to the forefront.¹¹ Are nuclear capabilities the ultimate guarantor of national security? India has two nuclear-armed neighbours, necessitating a constant vigil.

Globalisation and changes in technology have made it cheaper and easier for goods, services, and information to flow across borders and advance interconnectedness between countries,

relationships such as alliances and trade networks have become as important to any assessment of national power as capability-based measures.¹² Though interdependence can be a double-edged weapon, in today's world, when two states compete, the one with stronger and more robust relationships may retain the upper hand, even in the face of capability imbalances. Hence, relationships matter.

Self-Reliance Crucial to Sustaining and Winning Wars

One of the major takeaways is that India needs to wean away from import dependency. While the pursuit to infuse technology in the war-fighting system indeed remains an enduring one, the conclusion that we can draw is that self-sufficiency in critical technologies and investment in the Research and Development sector is an inescapable strategic imperative. The security of India cannot be outsourced.¹³

Inadequacies in military-industrial complexes have come to light. As per the reports, North Korea has transferred more artillery ammunition to Russia than the West has been able to supply Ukraine. Further, the monthly consumption of some munitions is much more than can be produced in a year.

Therefore, the reserves of ammunition are the greatest lesson one needs to learn from the Ukraine conflict. India has been cutting down the holding of reserves, this will need to be rethought. Not only are reserves required, but also the industrial base to produce more at a pace the war necessitates.

During the war, global supply chains are disrupted, and subcomponents may become difficult to obtain. Added to this is the lack of a skilled workforce with experience in a particular industry. The bottom line is that India must take a hard look at ensuring peacetime excess capacity in its military-industrial complex, or risk losing the next war.

Recently, the Army Chief stressed the importance of self-reliance in the defence sector and called for the infusion of technology into war-fighting systems. Under this endeavour, major initiatives are underway to transform the Indian Army into a modern, technology-driven, *Atmanirbhar* (Self-reliant) and battle-worthy force, so that India can execute its operational mandate more effectively.¹⁴

However, real *Atmanirbharta* will be achieved only when India can produce its own military requirements for the army, navy, and air force, in terms of hardware, software, arms, and ammunition. The Indian military support system must have a surge capability that can sustain military requirements even in a long-drawn conflict. Till that self-sufficiency is reached, India must enhance the war wastage reserves to a minimum of 60 days at an intense rate.

The Right to Precision

Precision is not only vastly more efficient in the effects it delivers but also allows a force to reduce its logistics tail and, thereby, makes it more survivable.

Precision weapons, however, are scarce and can be defeated by Electronic Warfare (EW). To enable kill chains to function at the speed of relevance, EW for attack, protection and direction finding is a critical element of modern combined arms operations. Sequencing fires to disrupt EW and create windows of opportunity for precision effects is critical and creates training requirements.¹⁵

The experience in Ukraine clarifies some of the critical effects of a contested Electro-Magnetic Spectrum (EMS). Military discourse has focused on the problem of EMS denial. The war provides a better canvas to assess the impact of EW on armies with appropriately resilient systems, tactics, techniques, and procedures.¹⁶

Denial can be achieved for a short period, or across a limited geographic area. However, any kind of targeted denial of bands of the EMS can be evaded by altering frequencies.

Left uncontested, EW slows kill chains and most importantly, degrades precision. The inability to determine accurate locations, let alone transmit timely data on target locations, or for munitions to achieve precise impacts against targets, all risk a force losing competitiveness against an opponent.¹⁷

As Lieutenant General Raj Shukla (Retd), the former Army Commander of Army Training Command said, “The Indian military needs to evaluate the entire challenge of precision weaponry and upgrade its capacities”. However, for precision munitions to function properly, it is essential to actively contest the EMS.¹⁸

Requirement of Trained Manpower

Manpower costs are increasingly becoming unmanageable. Despite progressing from third to fourth-generation weapon technologies in the short span of about two decades, modern armed armies are still far from being able to effect substantive reductions in manpower. A case in point being the North Atlantic Treaty Organization armies downsizing at the end of the Cold War which has now exposed their hollowness.¹⁹

Military manpower is increasingly becoming more expensive to recruit, train and retain. Modern technology may enable industry to reduce manpower, but similar benefits cannot be applied to the armed forces, where 'Boots on the ground still matter'.²⁰ Some analysts fear that while Ukraine may not have trained soldiers to man the weapons received from the West. Training also has various levels ranging from individual, crew, sub-unit, unit, and formation level training. At the end of the day, weaponry is not everything, you need a man behind the weapon.

Strategic Communication

Strategic communication forms an important component of today's battlefield. Social media and digital manipulation are the new tools of misinformation. It is getting increasingly difficult to distinguish the 'Truth'. The very 'Rules of War' have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force.

A relevant lesson is that in conflicts, public support for the conflict often hinges more on perceptions of the campaign's success than it does on casualties and loss of territory. Non-state groups have also used this power. There must, therefore, be various communication strategies for social media, print media and traditional electronic media that are managed at the national level.²¹

Conclusion

Wars often do not end until both sides are convinced that they are better off coexisting with their enemies than confronting them. Countries need to be well-prepared to face the future. The ongoing wars have once again brought to the forefront deterrence by

developing hard power, backed by a strong military-industrial base to ensure a fair degree of self-reliance.

While India is faced with territorial disputes with two of its neighbours, the challenge lies in balancing the developmental and welfare needs with those required to be spent on security. The country, therefore, needs to balance the two requirements while building on its hard power which is reflected not only in troop strength but also technology, capability and operational readiness backed by doctrines and resolve. India cannot afford to lower its vigil.

Endnotes

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